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NASA-057

INTERPRETATION OF THE N<sub>2</sub> LBH GLOW OBSERVED ON THE S3-4 SPACECRAFT

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RECEIVED  
JUL 14 1987

Submitted to Geophysical Research Letters

July 1987  
Revised August 1987

(NASA-CR-185102) INTERPRETATION OF THE N<sub>2</sub>  
LBH GLOW OBSERVED ON THE S3-4 SPACECRAFT  
(Alabama Univ.) 18 p CSCL C4A

N89-26296

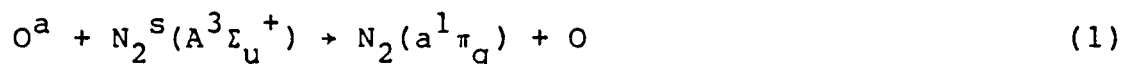
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## Abstract

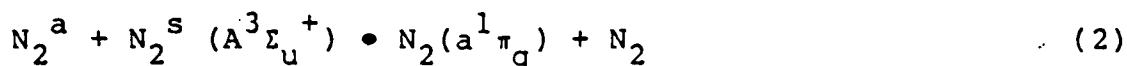
Emissions in the vacuum ultraviolet Lyman-Birge-Hopfield (LBH) bands of  $N_2$  have been observed at night from the S3-4 spacecraft and from the Space Shuttle. No atmospheric source of this emission has been identified. Conway et al. have reported that the intensity of the S3-4 LBH emission varied as the cube power of the  $N_2$  concentration,  $[N_2]^3$  or  $[N_2]^2[O]$ . They suggested a vehicle-atmosphere interaction as the source but found that the needed excitation cross-section would have to be unacceptably large. In this paper we show that recent models of the gas concentration build-up around large space vehicles predict concentrations that may be consistent with the observed LBH intensity variation with altitude. The emission in our model is generated primarily by secondary collisional excitation by ambient  $N_2$  and/or O of desorbed metastable molecular constituents. A Chapman-like production function in the induced gaseous environment results in the observed  $[N_2]^3$  altitude variation. A cross section of  $\sim 2.5 \times 10^{-18} \text{ cm}^2$  is required for excitation of desorbed metastable  $N_2(A)$  to the  $N_2(a^1\pi_g)$  state to account for the observed intensities.

## Introduction

Conway et al. (1987) have reported observations of vehicle induced emission in the Lyman-Birge-Hopfield (LBH) bands of  $N_2$  on the S3-4 spacecraft. The  $N_2(a^1\pi_g)$  state, from which the LBH bands arise, requires up to 9.75 eV for its excitation and there is no identified source for these bands in the non-auroral nightglow. Figure 1 reproduces their results for the altitude variation of the integrated band intensities between 1400 and 1700 Å for nadir viewing. Conway et al. (1987) report that the intensity varies with altitude as  $[N_2]^3$  (or  $[N_2]^2[O]$ ). They show that if the source mechanism is a three-stage excitation process involving the surface, then the expected LBH intensity would be ~16 orders of magnitude short of explaining the observed intensities. Since the observations were made viewing in the nadir direction, this suggests that the source of the glow is a gas-phase reaction. Observations of LBH emission were also observed by Torr et al. (1985) on the Shuttle at night when viewing in the nadir, which again suggests a gas-phase source mechanism. In this paper we utilize the vehicle contamination model of Rantanen et al. (1985) and Rantanen and Gordon (1987) which predicts a significant concentration enhancement of local gases around orbiting vehicles, to investigate the viability of the following hypothesized collisional excitation mechanisms:



or



followed by



Superscripts s and a refer to the spacecraft induced and ambient thermospheric concentrations, respectively. Based on Spacelab 1 observations which indicate enhanced  $N_2$  Vegard Kaplan emission, we suggest below that a significant fraction ( $\sim 10\%$ ) of  $N_2$  desorbed in the contamination model is produced in the  $A^3 \Sigma_u^+$  state. We therefore predict enhanced  $N_2$  Vegard Kaplan emission without the usual ratio to first and second positive prompt emissions, and this is consistent with the spectral observations made on the Spacelab 1 shuttle mission. For gas phase reactions, the ambient O and  $N_2$  have relative center of mass energies of  $\sim 4$  and  $\sim 5$  eV, respectively, which is sufficient to allow collisional excitation of the  $N_2(A)$  to the  $a^1 \pi_g$  state. Thus in processes (1) and (2) ambient thermospheric atomic oxygen and molecular nitrogen are hypothesized to collisionally excite the  $a^1 \pi$  state of  $N_2$ , which then radiates in the LBH bands. The gas buildup predicted by the contamination model is discussed below. While such models are yet to be substantiated by measurements, the induced gas enhancement does offer a possible explanation for the observed characteristics of the LBH emission.

### Configuration Contamination Model

Recently Rantanen et al. (1985) and Rantanen and Gordon (1987) predicted a significant concentration buildup around the Shuttle and other orbiting vehicles as a result of a non-linear interaction between molecules desorbed from the vehicle surface and the influx of ambient particles with relative velocities of  $\sim 8 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ . If the gases impacting the vehicle surfaces are thermally accommodated, for surface temperatures near  $\sim 300 \text{ }^\circ\text{K}$ , the desorbed products will have velocities of  $\sim 5 \times 10^4 \text{ cm s}^{-1}$ .

To provide a conceptual picture of how the contamination configuration model generates a density enhancement, we consider the following simple argument. The mean free path for a constituent traversing a gas of concentration  $n$  is given by

$$\lambda = \frac{1}{n\sigma} \quad (4)$$

where  $\sigma$  is the collision cross-section. The concentration buildup of desorbed gases scales as the ratio of the velocities of re-emitted ( $v_r$ ) to that of the ambient species ( $v_a$ ) and  $\lambda$  decreases to

$$\lambda = \frac{1}{n\sigma} \frac{v_r}{v_a} \quad (5)$$

If the re-emitted species are thermalized on the surface, the mean free path decreases by an order of magnitude. The re-emitted species, however, now encounter incoming ambients which further reduces the mean free path. As a result of these

interactions, the mean free path in the contamination buildup near a ram surface at ~200 km is 10 m compared to 1000 m for the undisturbed ambient gas. These results have been independently confirmed by Heuser et al. (1985) who utilized Bird's (1981) Monte Carlo approach.

Rantanen and Gordon (1987) have computed the gas concentration buildup in front of a flat rectangular surface directed with the normal to the surface into the velocity vector. The total ambient concentration used in the calculation was  $5 \times 10^9 \text{ cm}^{-3}$ , which corresponds to the thermosphere at approximately 200 km for low to moderate solar activity. The results of this calculation are reproduced here as Figure 2a. The enhancement at the surface is considerable and results in a column concentration of  $\sim 1.4 \times 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ . The concentration at the surface is  $2 \times 10^{11} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  which is 40 times the ambient. In addition, Rantanen and Gordon (1987) have modeled the concentration enhancement for such a surface travelling parallel to the velocity vector. Their results for this case are reproduced in Figure 2b. It can be seen from these two figures that while the enhancement along the parallel surface is less than the ram surface, it is still 2 to 3 times the local ambient concentration. However, it appears that the scale length is greater, ~10 m vs 5 m for the ram situation. It is the parallel surface case that would be relevant for comparison with the nadir viewing observations.

The model calculations reported by Rantanen and Gordon (1987) show that the contamination buildup in front of ram surfaces scales approximately linearly with total ambient

concentration and rather insensitively to surface area for large (> 1 m) diameters. For example, a surface with a diameter of 14 meters produced an enhancement ~50% greater than one 2 meters in diameter.

The composition of the gas enhancement is dependent on the desorbed surface species, which are in turn dependent on the composition mix of the ambient gas and constituents available for interaction on the vehicle surface.

#### LBH Glow Mechanism

To explain the observed LBH glow as a gas-phase process requires two key factors: (1) There must be a strong source of metastable electronically excited  $N_2$  in the surface desorption process, so that the  $a^1\pi_g$  state can be excited in a single gas phase collision with the 4 to 5 eV available from the ambient O or  $N_2$  in the center of mass system; (2) The processes involved must account for the  $[N_2]^3$  or  $[N_2]^2[O]$  scaling with altitude.

Green (1984) pointed out that when the thermal contribution to the total energy of the ambient  $N_2$  is taken into account, the nitrogen molecules will have energies with respect to the vehicle surface of  $9.3 \pm 2$  eV, compared with the 9.75 eV required to dissociate  $N_2$ . Thus  $N_2$  may dissociate on the surface on impact, with the product N atoms remaining adsorbed on the surface where they may reform into  $N_2$  molecules. The problem is that this process occurs near threshold energy, and might not be rapid. However, the energy partitioning in the interaction of gases with adsorbed atoms has been studied for many years, and it is well

established that several kinds of processes can lead to internal excitation of molecules formed on the surface. Green (1984) mentions Langmuir-Henschelwood and Rideal processes which have been observed to give rise to electronically excited  $N_2$  and  $O_2$  over a variety of surfaces (Mannella and Harteck, 1961). A detailed study of N-atoms has been made by Halpern and Rosner (1982) who have confirmed the production of electronically excited  $N_2$  for various surfaces. In particular, Golde and Thrush (1973) observed recombined  $N_2$  molecules leaving some surfaces in the metastable  $N_2$  ( $A^3\Sigma_u^+$ ) state. Green therefore proposed that atmospheric  $N_2$  can dissociate upon collision with the vehicle surface, producing N atoms which recombine to produce  $N_2(A)$  which then leave the surface.

Our mechanism simply requires that a significant fraction of the desorbed  $N_2$  reside in the  $N_2(A)$  state, for which the radiative lifetime is  $\sim 2$  seconds (Shemansky et al., 1971), which is large compared to the residence time of molecules in the contamination "cloud". We suggest that the  $N_2(A)$  molecules might be collisionally excited to the  $a^1\pi_g$  state by processes (1) and/or (2).

The  $[N_2]^3$  altitude dependence of the glow may arise as follows. Let  $F_0 = n^a v^a$  be the flux of incident ambient O and  $N_2$ . The flux which experiences a collision before reaching the surface is given by

$$F = F_0 - F_0 e^{-\tau} \quad (6)$$



where  $\tau$  is the attenuation depth given by

$$\tau = \sigma \int [x] ds \quad (7)$$

where  $\sigma$  is the collision cross-section (assumed for simplicity to be the same for O and  $N_2$ ) and  $\int [x] ds$  is the total column concentration in the gas build-up. The composition of the gas buildup will be mainly desorbed molecules. The column excitation rate is given by

$$\begin{aligned} I &= \sigma' F \int [N_2(A)] ds \\ &= \sigma' F_0 (1 - e^{-\tau}) \int [N_2(A)] ds \end{aligned} \quad (8)$$

where  $\sigma'$  is the cross section for collisional excitation of  $N_2(A)$  to  $N_2(a)$ , which we assume to be the same for O and  $N_2$ . In the case where  $\tau \ll 1$ , that is, for a small gas buildup,

$$I \approx \sigma \sigma' [F_0 \int [x^S] ds \int [N_2(A)^S] ds] \quad (9)$$

The product of the concentrations,  $[O^a + N_2^a]$ ,  $[x^S]$  and  $[N_2(A)^S]$  lies between  $[N_2^a]^2 [O^a]$  and  $[N_2^a]^3$ , since the concentration in the gas buildup scales linearly with the ambient atmosphere according to the Rantanen (private communication, 1987).

For the purpose of this estimate, we will consider the possible enhancement that might be induced for the S3-4 satellite at an altitude of 180 km, by scaling the Rantanen and Gordon

(1987) results accordingly. The total column concentration at 180 km at a surface parallel to the velocity vector is scaled linearly from Figure 2, and is  $\sim 2.8 \times 10^{13} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ . We will assume that at 180 km, a fraction  $\beta$  ( $\sim 0.25$ ) of the enhancement is  $\text{N}_2$ ; i.e.,  $\sim 7 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$  with some fraction  $\alpha$  ( $\sim 0.1$ ) in the A state. It must be emphasized that these values are only estimates and must await empirical verification. The incident O and  $\text{N}_2$  flux at 180 km is  $6 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$ . The total ambient concentration at 180 km is  $1.15 \times 10^{10} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ .

We will now consider the collisional excitation of the  $\text{N}_2$  molecules in the enhancement region by the relatively energetic flux of ambients. The column production of  $\text{N}_2(a^1\pi_g)$  using equation (8) becomes

$$I = \alpha \beta \sigma \sigma' F_0 \left( \int [x^S] ds \right)^2 \quad (10)$$

where  $\int [x^S] ds$  is  $2.8 \times 10^{13} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ .

If we assume that all of the  $\text{N}_2(a)$  produced radiates in the LBH bands, we can solve (10) directly for the effective collisional excitation cross-section required to explain  $\sim 600 \text{ R}$  of LBH emission observed by S3-4 at 180 km.

$$\begin{aligned} \sigma' &= I / [\alpha \beta \sigma F_0 \left( \int [x^S] ds \right)^2] \\ &\approx 2.5 \times 10^{-18} \text{ cm}^2 \end{aligned} \quad (11)$$

where we assume  $\sigma = 2 \times 10^{-15} \text{ cm}^2$ . The excitation collision cross-section inferred above may not be unreasonable for all the LBH

bands lying between 1400 Å and 1700 Å since in this case the target resides in an excited state which may require a smaller cross-section than for excitation from the ground state. The scale height of the emission will be  $\sim [N_2]^3$  for reaction (1) and (2) in agreement with the observations of Conway et al. (1987).

### Conclusion

We have demonstrated that if the concentrations predicted by the configuration contamination model of Rantanen et al. (1985) are accepted, then it is possible to explain the LBH glow observed by the S3-4 satellite in terms of collisional excitation of metastable  $N_2(A)$  to  $N_2(a^1\pi_g)$  in the vehicle induced gas cloud by the incoming flux of atmospheric neutrals. The contamination model predicts a significant column concentration of desorbed  $N_2$  near nadir surfaces and our proposed mechanism requires a significant fraction ( $\sim 10\%$ ) residing in the  $N_2(A)$  state. The desorbed  $N_2(A)$  in the induced enhancement is then collisionally excited by the relatively energetic ambient  $N_2$  and/or O. The result is an induced LBH emission that will vary approximately as  $[N_2]^3$ . The required excitation cross-section is  $2.5 \times 10^{-18} \text{ cm}^2$ .

### Acknowledgements

We thank R. Rantanen and SEA personnel for most useful discussions and for providing us with results from their model. This work was supported by NASA Contracts NAGW-922, NAS8-057, and NASA Contract NAS8-37106 to RCA Government Services.

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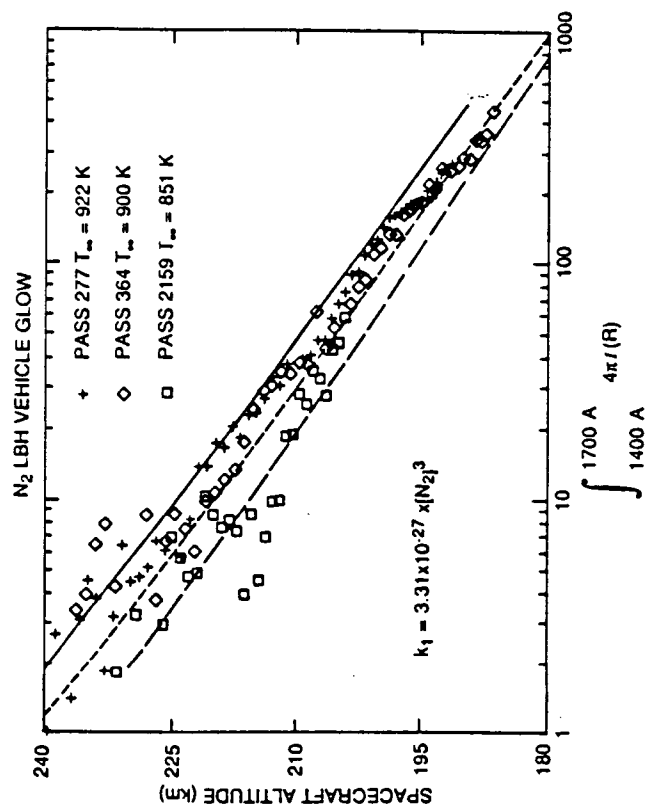
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## Figure Captions

Fig. 1. Total intensity in Rayleighs between 1400Å and 1700Å vs spacecraft altitude compared to MSIS-83 densities of molecular nitrogen. The product of the cube of the  $N_2$  density and the factor  $3.31 \times 10^{-27}$  Rayleighs  $cm^9$  for the three passes are shown by the solid, dotted and dashed lines. (From Conway et al. [1987]).

Fig. 2. Isocontours of concentration enhancement predicted by the contamination model: (a) normal to plane surface into velocity vector; (b) plane surface parallel to velocity vector. (From Rantanen and Gordon, 1987).



Fig



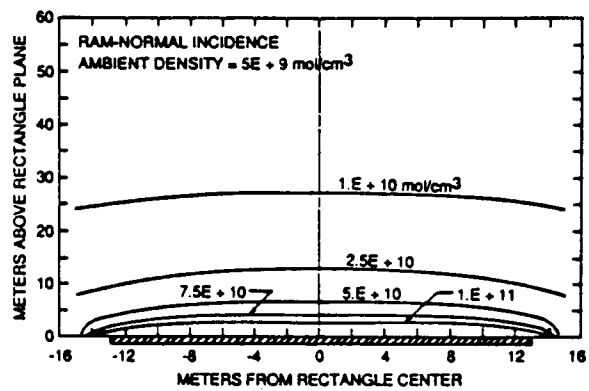


FIG 2

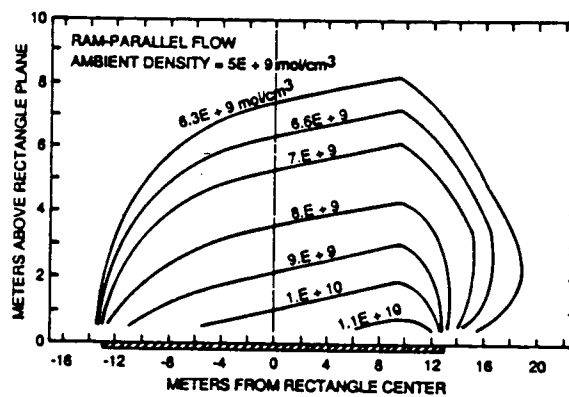


FIG 3